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# **Social media teams as digital vanguards: the question of leadership in the management of official Facebook and Twitter accounts of Occupy Wall Street, Indignados, and UK Uncut**

## **ABSTRACT**

*Political campaigning in recent protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street in the US, the indignados/15M movement in Spain and UK Uncut has witnessed the rise of social media teams, small activist groups responsible for managing official and high-visibility social media accounts. Going against dominant assertions about the leaderless character of contemporary digital movements, the article conceptualises social media teams as digital vanguards, collective and informal leadership structures that perform a “vanguard-function” (Nunes, 2014) of direction of collective action through the use of digital media of communication. Various aspects of the internal functioning of vanguards are discussed: a) their formation and composition; b) processes of internal coordination; c) struggles for the control of social media accounts. The article reveals the profound contradiction between the leadership role exercised by social media teams and the adherence of digital activists to libertarian values of openness, horizontality and leaderlessness. The espousal of these principles has run against the persistence of power dynamics, personal ambitions and factionalism leading to deep conflicts within these teams that have hastened the decline of the movements they served. These problems call for a new conceptual framework to better render the nature of leadership in digital movements and new political practices to better regulate the management of social media assets.*

**Keywords:** Social media; leadership; Occupy Wall Street; media teams; power; horizontality; leaderlessness

“The social media team comprised people who were doing Twitter, livestream and Facebook. Not everybody was working on everything, but everyone had to know what everyone was doing, what messages were getting promoted and that if an action was happening someone on Twitter had to be there. At some point it was 16 people. I think that was the biggest that it got in terms of the number of people who had passwords or access”. The testimony of Joan Donovan, an Occupy Wall Street activist based in Los Angeles and one of the initiators of the InterOccupy<sup>1</sup> activist networking project, describes one of the key organisational structures that have emerged within current digital protest movements: social media teams.

Managing official Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr and livestream accounts of many recent movements, these small groups, comprising up to 20 people have played an important - though often invisible - role in many recent social movements. They have been responsible for managing official movement social media platforms with a public of hundreds of thousands users, attending to such tasks as writing, editing and scheduling Facebook status messages, and tweets, responding to user interactions, as well as producing accompanying materials, from websites, to videos and visuals. In so doing these groups have deeply shaped the communications and ultimately the action of many recent protest movements, such as Occupy Wall Street in the US, the 15M/Indignados Movement in Spain and UK Uncut in Great Britain analysed in these articles, whose physical appearance was preceded by an intense communication barrage on social media (AUTHOR, 2012).

Social media teams constitute an intriguing object of study, because they allow exploring the important but largely invisible organisational structures that have emerged within recent social movements in their use of social media and lay bare the inconsistencies of dominant interpretations of digital movements as being “leaderless”, “non-hierarchical” (Castells, 2012, Mason, 2012) or - to use a term that has become popular among activists - “horizontal” (Sitrin, 2006). In fact the very existence of groups tasked with the management of key communication channels, suggests how far from having disappeared or become irrelevant, leadership understood as a *process of direction of collective action*, involving various forms of influence and control (Melucci, 1996, Weber, 2002: 221-225), continues to exist alongside the participatory dynamics that have come to be considered as the signature of protest movements in a social media age. To

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<sup>1</sup> InterOccupy is a project that “seek[s] to foster communication between individuals, Working Groups and local General Assemblies, across the movement” <http://interoccupy.net/>

express the covert leadership performed by social media teams, these structures will be role will be construed as digital vanguards, political groups that *de facto* perform a “vanguard-function” (Nunes, 2014), of direction of collective action, in a way reminiscent of historical political vanguards.

Building on my previous research on social media and activism in the 2011 protest wave and my argument about the persistence of leadership in digital movements (Gerbaudo, 2012, 2014), this article explores the internal functioning of social media teams and evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of the leadership role they perform. My analysis draws on expert interviews with 12 leading digital activists from the forefront of contemporary anti-austerity and anti-capitalist protest movements - the Spanish 15M/indignados, Occupy Wall Street and UK Uncut - who have been directly involved in the management of official movement social media. Analytically, I focus on three key aspects of the working of social media activist teams: a) their formation and composition; b) processes of internal organisation; and c) power struggles arising around the ownership and control of “power accounts”.

The argument of the article focuses on the contradiction between the libertarian values predicated by these movements, and their nature as vanguards. Informed by the anti-authoritarianism of post-1968 movements and by the techno-utopianism of hacker culture, social media teams have adhered to principles of openness, horizontality, and leaderlessness. Yet, rather than doing away with leadership the adoption of these principles has ended up making leadership invisible and social media teams unaccountable leading to a number of organisational quandaries. Social media teams have witnessed a tendency to cliquishness, the emergence of new forms of power stratification embedded in the hierarchy of content management systems used by activists, and the explosion of power struggles for the control of social media accounts. These incidents, whose effects have often been very detrimental for the connected movements, call for the development of new and more realistic ethical principles that might better regulate the operations of social media teams making them more transparent and accountable.

## **Leadership reloaded**

Talking of leadership in relation to digital protest movements is quite a vexing task, not just because of the inherent complexity of the notion of leadership, but also due to the degree of

suspicion it produces among many in the activist community and in the academia alike. Leadership has become akin to a *taboo* topic, one that is better not talked about due to the sensibilities any open discussion of this issue is likely to hurt. Yet, the dominant consensus about the “leaderless” character of contemporary movements needs to be urgently confronted, not only because – as I will demonstrate in this article – abundant quantitative and qualitative empirical evidence disproves it, but also because the libertarian narrative of leaderlessness and horizontality is ethically and politically dangerous, since it allows for *de facto* leaders to remain unaccountable (Gerbaudo, 2012: 165-166).

Leadership alongside connected notions as mobilisation and organisation has constituted one of the key concepts in the analysis of social movements. When we talk of leadership, we fundamentally refer to the process of direction of collective action (Gramsci, 1971: 125-127, Melucci, 1996, Tarrow, 1998, Morris and Staggenborg, 2004) by means of influence and control. Leaders are the people who “take the lead”: the “movers and shakers” of collective action (Morris and Staggenborg, 2004: 178), “actors whose hands and brain rest *disproportionately* on the throttles of social movements” (2004: 191). They are “the agents of mobilization of a movement and the promoters of its organisational structure” (Melucci, 1996: 335), or to follow another definition, the “organisers” who “use contention to exploit political opportunities, create collective identities, bring people together in organisations and mobilise them against more powerful opponents” (Tarrow, 1998: 3).

Despite the prominence of the question of leadership in social movements literature, in recent years a number of scholars have argued that this notion is not relevant anymore due to the increasing complexity of society and the “spontaneous”, “horizontal”, “rhizomatic” and “leaderless” character of contemporary activism (see for example, Mason, 2012, Castells, 2012, Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, 2013). Counter to the dominant interpretation of digital protest movements as horizontal and leaderless, in this theoretical section I demonstrate the continuing relevance of leadership for an understanding of the organisational dynamics of protest movements in a social media era, and argue for a conceptualisation of social media teams as digital vanguards, political groups that act as organising hubs for social movements through the use of digital communication.

## *Beyond the illusion of leaderlessness*

The profound suspicion towards the notion of leadership within contemporary movements needs to be understood as the reflection of the influence of libertarian values deriving essentially from two sources: the anti-authoritarianism of post-68 social movements and the techno-utopianism of hacker culture. A central theme in post-1968 movements in the West has been an anti-authoritarian emphasis on self-organisation and individual self-realisation against the power of large-scale organisations of the Fordist era: corporations, trade unions, parties and the state apparatuses (Touraine, 1971, Castells, 2004: 18-20). This orientation strongly resonates with attitudes emerging from the techno-utopianism of hacker culture that has accompanied the development of computing ushering in values of openness, transparency and freedom of information (Levy, 1984, Jordan and Taylor, 2004, Turner, 2006).

The left-libertarianism of social movements and the techno-utopianism of hacker culture have exerted a profound influence on the value-system of recent protest movements as seen in the popularity gained by three libertarian principles, which, as I will argue, deeply inform the ethos of social media teams: openness, horizontality, and leaderlessness.

Openness criticises the tendency to closure displayed by traditional organisations and their forms of communication. It draws inspiration from the open-source movement, in which software is made available for use and modification, and from the philosophy of open-publishing that guided the development of the alternative information website Indymedia, which well before the social web made user-generated content ubiquitous, allowed Internet users to post information without editorial filters (Pickard, 2006).

Horizontality expresses the rejection of hierarchy and a demand of radical equality. The term was popularised by Marina Sitrin (2006) in her account of the 2001 Argentina occupation movement and its assemblies, but it has become a referent to describe the participatory and networked nature of social media conversations (see for example Penney and Dadas, 2013).

Leaderlessness, a notion that was widely adopted within the 2011 protest wave (Gerbaudo, 2012: 132), follows logically from the former principles in expressing a rejection or at least suspicion vis-à-vis leaders of all sorts. In their complex these principles provide a sort of ethical matrix that informs the behaviour of contemporary digital activists.

The problem with these libertarian values is that many activists and academics have

ended up taking them at face-value, not just as ethical principles but also as valid descriptions of the actual practice of contemporary social movements (Mason, 2012, Castells, 2012: 224). This leap is not just theoretically uncritical, but also empirically misguided given that – as I stand to demonstrate in this section - an abundant body of scholarship has demonstrated the persistence of power dynamics and leadership in digital movements. To deconstruct this libertarian discourse, which has acquired the status of an orthodoxy in relevant academic debates, we need to question the two fallacious claims on which it rests: the idea 1) that the lack of formal organisational structures typical of post-1968 “new social movements” and 2) the interactive affordances of digital media result in the elimination of leadership in any form.

The contention that the decline of formal mass membership organisation leads to the eradication of leadership, proposed by various scholars (Epstein, 2001, Bennett, 2003, Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), reflects the problematic tendency to identify leadership only with formalised and bureaucratic organisations (Barker, Johnson, Lavalette, 2001). It is true that scholarship on new social movements emerging after 1968 has evidenced their network-like and flexible character (see for example, Melucci, 1996, Diani, 2000, Gerlach, 2001). However, this does not mean that leadership has disappeared. In their influential theory of SPIN (segmentary, polycentric, networked) movements, for example, L.P. Gerlach and V.H. Hines (1970, Gerlach, 2001) argued for example that new social movements reflected the presence of “many leaders and centers of leadership” (Gerlach, 2001: 294). Reflecting the increasing complexity of post-industrial society leadership has become more diffuse and interactive as proposed by the concept of “distributed leadership” (Brown and Hosking, 1986).

The idea that the Internet constitutes a radically egalitarian democratic arena allowing for egalitarian participation, which in recent years has been proposed by a number of theorists (Shirky, 2008, Van Dijk, 2012), most famously by Manuel Castells in his theory of the network society (1997, 2004), also rests on dubious empirical grounds. Analysing the mathematical properties of the Internet Physicist Albert-Laszlo Barabasi famously argued that it approximated the model of a “scale-free network” (Barabasi and Albert 1999, Barabasi and Bonabeau, 2003). Scale-free networks follow power laws also known Pareto distributions i.e. conditions in which certain nodes acting as “hubs” have a much greater number of links than other nodes and possess a tendency to progressively attract more links than smaller nodes. Thus the contention that the Internet would facilitate an erosion of leadership processes due to its de-centralised and radically

distributed communication architecture are fundamentally spurious. The spatially distributed architecture of online communication has in fact been accompanied by centralising forms of functional integration and power concentration most glaring manifested in the rise of digital titans as Google and Facebook (McChesney, 2013).

The persistence of forms of power concentration and leadership dynamics both within social movements and online communication has a strong bearing on what happens at the intersection between these two fields: in the use of social media in connection with protest campaigns. In their analysis of tweets of the 2011 Egyptian revolution Christopher Wilson and Alexandra Dunn noticed that the great majority was produced by 200 “power” accounts (2011: 1265), a tiny fraction of those involved in social media activity. A similar situation was evidenced when looking at the Indignados’ communication on Twitter in a study conducted by researchers of the University of Zaragoza in Spain (González-Bailón et al., 2011: 8), and in a longitudinal study of Occupy Wall Street Twitter communication (Wang et al., 2012). Both studies retrieved strong power laws at work. In conclusion, much of the scholarship about social media and activism appears to have wrongly interpreted as a disappearance of leadership what is in fact a reorientation of leadership and its adaptation to the complex and fragmented landscape of post-Fordist societies.

### *Conceptualising digital vanguards*

For the purpose of this article I wish to concentrate on the phenomena that possibly best exemplify the persistence of leadership dynamics within digital movements: the official social media channels of protest movements and the teams tasked with their management. These Facebook and Twitter accounts have often been described as “power accounts”, because they have accrued a user base of hundreds of thousands of fans on Facebook and Twitter, making them the most popular activist accounts in relevant political conversations. Furthermore, as I have demonstrated in my previous work, their influence on collective action has been profound, given the way in which they have launched protest campaigns, attracted the attention of hundreds of thousands of web user and acted as a key channel to launch calls to action (Gerbaudo, 2012).

Official social media channels have played an important role in the three movements considered in this article: the Spanish 15M movement, Occupy Wall Street and UK Uncut. The



Spanish 15M movement owes its name from the initial day of protest on May 15<sup>th</sup> when thousands of Spaniards took to the streets against the economic crisis and political corruption. The movement soon developed in a series of occupation, assemblies and marches that attracted the sympathy of large sections of the Spanish public. In the 15M/indignados movement, official social media accounts included the Facebook page of Democracia Real Ya<sup>2</sup>, the protest organisation that originally called for the 15th of May 2011 protests, counting around 546,000 likes on its fan page, and 233,000 followers on its Twitter account. The Occupy Wall Street movement developed in response to the economic crisis and in criticism of the financial sector. It began on September 17<sup>th</sup> with a protest camp erected in Zuccotti Park at short distance from the New York Stock Exchange and in manifold copycat occupations all over the country and abroad. In the US the most visible accounts of the Occupy movement included the Twitter accounts @OccupyWallStreetNYC<sup>3</sup> with 171,000 followers and @OccupyWallStreet<sup>4</sup> with 199,000 followers, and the Facebook pages Occupy Wall St<sup>5</sup> with 551,000 likes, and Occupy Together<sup>6</sup> with 252,000 likes. UK Uncut is a protest movement against austerity and tax avoidance that emerged in Great Britain in October 2010 and used direct action to close a number of high street stores accused of practicing tax avoidance at the public expenses. UK Uncut's social media asserts included an official Facebook page<sup>7</sup> with 103,368 likes and a Twitter account<sup>8</sup> with 81,800 followers.

To make sense of the working of the social media teams responsible for the management of activist power accounts I utilise the notion of “digital vanguard”. This term serves to express the fact that the relatively small groupings responsible for the management of official social media accounts, have performed what Rodrigo Nunes has called a “vanguard-function” (2014) of direction of collective action by means of digital communication, by writing tweets and status messages, responding to users etc. and in so doing producing strategic communication campaigns.

The theory of vanguards traditionally originates from *What is to be done?* (1905) where

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2 <https://www.facebook.com/AsociacionDRY>

3 <https://twitter.com/OccupyWallStNYC>

4 <https://twitter.com/OccupyWallSt>

5 <https://www.facebook.com/OccupyWallSt>. There is an alternate page named <https://www.facebook.com/OccupyWallSt1> with over 663,000 likes

6 <https://www.facebook.com/OccupyTogether>

7 <https://www.facebook.com/ukuncut>

8 <https://twitter.com/UKuncut>

Vladimir Lenin saw the vanguard party as the pivot of a successful revolutionary strategy. The vanguard party was conceived as a tightly bound organization capable of instigating revolutionary mass mobilization by means of propaganda and agitation. Antonio Gramsci described it as a sort of “modern prince”, a collective leadership structure, assuming the role that in the past was performed by individual leaders (1971: 129-130). Due to its association with Leninism, the notion of vanguards has for long been seen as synonymous with authoritarianism and paternalism (see for example Graeber, 2004). However, vanguards have by no means been limited to Leninist politics alone. Elements of vanguardism have also inflected the organizational theory of anarchism and many anti-authoritarian protest movements inspired by anarchist principles. For example Mikhail Bakunin’s proposal for an International Brotherhood, a clandestine network of veteran activists who would direct mass revolutionary action (Guerin, 1970: 153), was fundamentally vanguardist in character.

In more recent decades, the rise of the New Left and of new social movements in the 70s and 80s, has been accompanied by the emergence of organisational structures such as collectives and affinity groups (Epstein, 1991), which, despite their anti-authoritarianism, can also be interpreted as movement vanguards of sorts, due to the way in which they have acquired the role of organising hubs “leading the way” for the entire movement. In her essay on the “tyranny of structurelessness” for example, Jo Freeman noticed how the rejection of formal organisation in the feminist movement, was accompanied by the emergence of activist elites, small groups of activists and friends that thanks to their expertise and social capital, ended up playing an influential but largely invisible role in the direction of collective action (1972). Similarly to the collectives describes by Barbara Epstein (1991), these groups abhorred being seen as leaders or vanguards. Yet, *de facto* they fulfilled a vanguard-function (Nunes, 2014), by performing the strategic task of giving a direction to collective action. This contradiction between libertarian criticisms of leadership and the emergence of vanguardist forms of collective leadership is very relevant to understand the dynamics of digital movements.

To complete the theoretical framework of this article it can be said that the notion of digital vanguards integrates two key elements that are crucial to understand the specificity of the leadership performed by social media teams: its collective and participatory character. First, talking of vanguards in this context highlights the predominantly collective rather than individual character of leadership processes. This is an important point given the extent to which leadership

continues to be associated with individual leaders, such as Martin Luther King in the US civil rights movement or Daniel Cohn-Bendit in May '68, overlooking the prominence of collective leadership structures, sometimes named “leadership teams” (Ganz, 2000) in many social movements. Secondly, the notion, and in particular the use of the adjective “digital”, aims at capturing the historically specific character of the leadership performed by social media teams and their reflection of prevalent forms of social experience and social values in the context of a digital society. As I will argue, social media teams have attempted with varying results to integrate libertarian principles in their activity, by trying to make their groups at least partly open to outsiders and avoiding fixed and formalised roles. This feature, which will be unveiled in the ensuing empirical section, suggests the need to go beyond view of leadership and participation as mutually exclusive processes and to appreciate their mutual imbrication.

## **Methods**

This article stems from an extensive research project about social media activism, across a number of countries invested by the recent wave of popular movements. For the purpose of this article I focus on the indignados/15M movement in Spain, Occupy Wall Street, and UK Uncut, and on 12 “expert interviews” (Bogner, Littig, Menz, 2009) conducted with key digital activists in these movements. Interviewees were selected because of their direct knowledge of the operations of key activist accounts. The type of research methods hereby utilised is one that is well established in previous research about social movements (see for example Passy and Giugni, 2000). Specifically, the tiny size of the sample is justified by a) the expert character of the interview and b) by the small dimension of the population of social movement organisers to be analysed. Interviewees are identified, except for one case, as indicated in the appendix, by the real names, for which the author obtained permission from the interviewees.

### **Managing “official” activist social media**

Social media teams constitute a rather elusive object of investigation. While the presence of these teams should be obvious to movement participants, due to the fact that “Facebook and

Twitter do not post by themselves” as ironically put by Steve Reid, a key organiser of the anti-austerity movement UK Uncut, the existence and functioning of these groups has often remained a sort of half-secret known only to those deeply involved in the activist community, but mostly ignored by fellow travellers<sup>9</sup>.

The obscurity in which social media teams have often been shrouded is a consequence of the contradiction that constitutes the key finding emerging from this empirical section: the presence of a profound tension between digital activists' adherence to libertarian principles of openness, horizontality and leaderlessness and the persistence of leadership dynamics incarnated in the form of digital vanguards. While the secrecy surrounding social media teams also reflected other factors, including security considerations, due to the legitimate fear of police infiltration, and possible prosecutions for those involved in managing protest communications, its main reason had to do with the fact that the very existence of these teams was embarrassing for activists, since it blatantly contradicted the official narrative of leaderlessness and horizontality. Why would there be communication centres and dedicated teams, if the movement were truly horizontal as often proclaimed?

In the course of the empirical section I will approach this paradox, in the terms of what Theodor Adorno called an immanent contradiction (Adorno, 2010), i.e. a contradiction between the principles that are supposed to regulate practice, and the actual practice itself. This critical examination requires delving into what we could call the “back office” or “backstage” (Goffman, 1959) of activist social media, the largely hidden organisational practices and forms of political labour involved in the management of official social media accounts, focusing on three aspects: a) the composition of social media teams; b) their internal coordination; and c) the power struggles that arose within them.

Each of these levels of analysis manifests a specific contradiction between the high-minded libertarian values adopted by contemporary movements and their often far more prosaic practice. First, while social media teams operated with a notion of radical openness, they have in reality been marked by forms of closure due to the desire of veteran activists to maintain some degree of editorial and political control. Second, while social media teams subscribed to the notion of horizontality, they have been characterised by forms of internal power stratification

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<sup>9</sup> This might explain why social media teams have never mentioned in the existing scholarly literature, also as a consequence of the fact that few scholars in the field have conducted on-the-ground fieldwork and spoken with activists, contenting themselves with quantitative data analysis alone.

reflected in the positioning of participants in the hierarchy of rights and permissions of the management platforms of social media accounts. Finally, while social media teams have subscribed to the idea of leaderlessness and to an anti-authoritarian critique of power, they have been torn by bitter disputes over the control of accounts.

### ***The formation and composition of social media teams***

Across the three movements analysed social media teams were characterised by a number of important differences. Most notably some of them acted as working groups emanating from the local general assemblies, as it was the case with Occupy Wall Street in New York and Los Angeles, and others constituting ad-hoc groupings within a certain protest organisation, as is the case with Democracia Real Ya and UK Uncut. Despite this variation they displayed important commonalities in their size, composition and the tasks they performed. Based on the interviews I have conducted the size of these teams varied between a minimum of just 2 people to a maximum of 20<sup>10</sup>, a size typical of movement vanguards seen in the context of direct action movements of the 70s and 80s (Epstein, 1991). The majority of media team members were in their early 20s and late 30s, were experienced in IT, and were predominantly male, though female representation appeared to be significantly higher than in hacker groups as Anonymous and Lulzsec (Coleman, 2014).

The setting up of dedicated social media teams was motivated by the great amount of work required to successfully run a social media communication campaign, and the fact that social media constituted the main communication channel for the movements analysed. Counter to the caricature of digital activism as “slacktivism” (Morozov, 2009), the work of content production and management on social media accounts was so intense that it could hardly be executed by one individual, but required the cooperation of a committed team of activists. The heavy workload was due to the fact that - as described by Joan Donovan - successful accounts needed to deliver both “quantity” and “quality”. Not only did effective social media campaigning require a significant volume of status messages and tweets, with peaks of over a message per

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<sup>10</sup> During the interviews 10 people were given as responsible for managing the Facebook and Twitter channel of Democracia Real Ya, in Spain, 20 people were responsible for managing the @OccupyWallStreetNYC Twitter account in the US at the peak of the movement, and equally a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 20 people were responsible for social media communications of the UK Uncut group.

hour during periods of high activity. Content also needed to be carefully thought out and verified, given that as Donovan highlights spreading rumours and inaccurate information of the type especially likely to arise during intense phases of protest action, would significantly dent the credibility of activist social media. Finally, operating official social media channels, required a highly diverse range of skills to perform various tasks involved including producing text, dealing with security issues, preparing visual material, scheduling messages and responding to users, thus making it practically impossible for only one individual to successfully run an activist account.

Social media teams usually started small with the initial core often constituted by close-knit groups of activists and friends and progressively expanded to encompass more people. “Initially it was three of us working on the Facebook page of Occupy. It was me and two friends who I really trusted. And once the movement took off, we started adding more people to the group” - explains Isham Christie, an Occupy Wall Street activist and one of the founders of the main OWS Facebook fanpage. “We tried to incorporate people from what we thought were our multiple audiences in the movement, and incorporate people from the different issue areas that we thought were important. We had people coming from the housing perspective, from the student debt perspective, and from other issues areas we considered important”. Similar was the trajectory of the communication team of Democracia Real Ya absorbed people from various cities across Spain involved in the movement, to ensure better representation of its local support base, as described by Klaudia Álvarez, a key member of the team.

This inclusivity reflected a genuine attempt to implement the value of openness predicated by social media teams. However, there are always practical limits to openness and inclusivity, and social media teams were no exception, with a tendency to cliquishness often tending to arise. Steve Reid a member of the anti-austerity campaigning group UK Uncut for example recounts how the core group of the organisation that was responsible for maintaining the social media assets was mostly composed of friends who had known each other at the Climate Camp protests in the late 2000s, and many of whom lived together, making it quite difficult to open to outsiders. Furthermore, as asserted by Shawn Carrié, an activist part of the team responsible for managing one of the main Occupy Wall Street Twitter accounts @OccupyWallStreetNYC, veteran activists frequently tried to set some control on new people wanting to be involved in the team, because if the group had been left unconditionally open “it

would have been a complete chaos”. This understandable element of caution however often became an excuse for excluding outsiders as lamented by Joan Donovan

[T]eams became very rigid. It was very difficult to pass in and out of these social media groups. It was kind of strange too, because everyone was complaining that there was too much work, but on the other hand there was not enough trust to spread that work to other people.

In conclusion, a number of concerns, including fears about possible infiltrators or opportunists, as well as the desire of maintaining some control over content production by more veteran activists practically ran against the commitment to radical openness.

### *The internal coordination of social media teams*

A similar contradiction between principle and practice impinged the internal coordination of social media teams. These groups ostensibly adopted “horizontal” forms of internal coordination, based on an assertion of radical equality, and the rejection of fixed roles and job descriptions of bureaucratic organisations as parties and trade unions (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). Liam a member of the UK Uncut core activist team asserts that the main aim of social media use was to ensure horizontal communication within the movement. Similarly, Fabio Gándara, one the founders of Democracia Real Ya, argues that within DRY horizontal principles were applied, and that “you could not talk about one or another person being leaders of the whole movement”. Despite these assertions of horizontality, the actual practice of these groups ended up being characterised internally by evident forms of power stratification, with different participants possessing different degree of influence over the editorial process. As we will see this tendency was most glaringly reflected in the positioning of activists in the hierarchy of rights and permissions of the content management system used to coordinate collective work.

The adherence to the principle of horizontality was enforced through the adoption of consensus-based decision making procedures, similar to the ones used in the popular assemblies that have become a signature of many contemporary movements, informed by the principle that whenever possible all participants should agree on group decisions. Collective consensus was negotiated through a series of meetings and discussions, conducted both online, through such a number of services such as Mumble chat sessions, Skype conference calls, Facebook groups, or alternative social network sites as Lorea, as well as through face-to-face meetings. In certain occasions members of the team were expected to abide by explicit guidelines. Democracia Real

Ya for example had a 8-point text, defining the group's identity and mission as well as a style guide that among other things asked contributors to social media accounts not to respond to trolls, to stop flames from escalating, and indicated a maximum of 1 message per hour, to avoid overloading the timeline of internet users. As Javier Toret, a prominent activist of Democracia Real Ya explains the team "worked in accordance with the general coordination [of DRY] and they had sufficient autonomy to work within the agreements and the 'style' DRY had established". Elsewhere, as in the case of the main Occupy Facebook page, coordination was more loose, the main concern being not to "throw in random topics", as described by Isham Christie.

The adoption of the philosophy of consensus decision-making did not however generate a truly "horizontal" situation, in which all participants possessed the same say in the management of social media accounts. In fact, counter to the image of horizontality, forms of internal power stratification affected all the social media teams discussed in this article, with different individuals commanding varying degrees of influence on the content channelled by social media. The presence of informal hierarchies was manifested in the fact that despite proclaims of horizontality at different points the activists who were doing more work took on the role of coordinators to ensure organisational structure. In the case of DRY as Klaudia Álvarez puts it "the people who worked the most ended up taking more responsibility in collective work". Furthermore, forms of hierarchy were inscribed in the content management systems as Hootsuite, Co-tweet or Buffer often used by social media teams<sup>11</sup>. While some members were only allowed to produce new content, others were also entitled to edit and approve other people's content and others still managed user access to the accounts.

The correspondence between organisational and technical hierarchies is well captured in the testimony of Shawn Carrié, relating the internal functioning of the team managing @OccupyWallStNYC

There is maybe 20 people who have access, and maybe 8 of those people who can approve... What it is, is a system of privileges and permissions. Everybody has access to the account but it has a little bit of structure where anybody can write tweets, but then they get put into a list which needs to be approved and

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<sup>11</sup> While at the inception of these movements, some teams simply operated by giving everybody in the group the login details to access Facebook and Twitter pages, in most cases they shifted to using these social media management system to streamline work. This was an efficiency-oriented move aimed at streamlining content production and management. However, this shift also entailed the creation of a hierarchy of control over the content produced.



the whole group looks at it, and it is happening all the time 24/7. It is a running list. We use a programme to streamline it. Somebody submits something he/she wants tweeted and all the group has the possibility to look at it, and they can edit it.

As this testimony demonstrates, the everyday practice of social media teams raised a number of practical concerns that could hardly be reconciled with the principle of horizontality and led activists to accept the presence of forms of hierarchy. It is true that the taking of leading roles within teams tended to follow meritocratic criteria, similar to the ones seen in many hacker groups. However, the very existence of such leading roles, coupled with the lack of alertness about their existence and of concrete practices to restrain them prepared the terrain for misunderstandings and recriminations that in certain circumstances escalated into excruciating power struggles, with detrimental results for social media teams and the movements they served.

### *Struggles for the control of accounts*

The persistence of power and leadership dynamics within social media teams, and their nature as digital vanguards competing for power, has nowhere been more painfully on display than in the struggles around the control of social media assets witnessed in many recent social movements. In a number of occasions disputes about the management of activist power accounts have seen competing factions fighting to secure control over these assets, with activists engaging in the banning of rivals, and in mutual accusations of “hi-jacking” collective resources. There appears to be virtually no recent digital movement that has not incurred in one of these incidents. These disputes have often been very demoralising for the social movements involved, and have contributed to hasten their decline.

In the case of Democracia Real Ya, a split opened between two different fronts holding different political views about the future of DRY, on the eve of the first anniversary of the movement in Spring 2012. One group nicknamed “Refundacion” (re-foundation) wanted to turn Democracia Real Ya into a legally registered association. The other group named “Reinicia” (re-start) or “Dry Red” (Dry Network) opposed the process of formalisation of DRY and wanted the group to remain an informal structure or “network”. After a series of verbal confrontations between members of the two groups that took place both offline in the context of movement assemblies and online through chat sessions on Mumble and other platforms, the rift became so vociferous that the two factions ended up partitioning the social media assets of Democracia Real

Ya. The “Refundación” group got hold of the Facebook page, and the “Red” group retaliated by securing control over the Twitter account. Mutual accusations of having hi-jacked collective assets ensued. The rift resulted in a severe reputational damage for Democracia Real Ya, which from that day lost much of its credibility with its messages being ignored by its subscribers as asserted by many of my interviewees from DRY.

In the case of Occupy Wall Street conflicts over the control of key social media accounts had already surfaced at the height of the mobilisation in the Autumn and Winter of 2011, leading to repeated frictions among the members of social media teams. The most evident manifestations of these struggles however became more apparent well after the peak of mobilisation, in 2014, when various groups and individuals tried to assert control over the highly valuable social media assets left behind by Occupy. In February 2014 activist Justine Tunney who had been involved in the early stage of Occupy, and who had been personally responsible for registering various activist social media accounts reasserted control on the main Twitter account @occupywallst she had created back in 2011, by tweeting “This Twitter handle is now back under the management of its founder: @JustineTunney. Let’s start a revolution”. Tunney a self-defined “champagne tranarchist” and a Google engineer acted out of frustration for the direction taken by Occupy Wall Street, and the way she had felt treated by other activists. A sort of “public breakdown” – as described by fellow activist Micah White, the person credited with inventing the name “Occupy Wall Street” – ensued with Tunney writing a series of bizarre messages, including one in which she proposed to create a non-violent militia. On August 8<sup>th</sup> of the same year, Justin Wedes, another high profile Occupy Wall Street activist based in Detroit, after a longstanding argument with people on the “Tweet boat” social media team asserted control over another key social media asset of the movement, the account @occupywallstreetNYC, before suspending the account.

Struggles for the control of key activist accounts should not be seen as trivial and inconsequential incidents, that is, “petty squabbles”. These incidents have had tangible consequences for the movements affected. First, they contributed in creating deep rifts among core activists dividing forces. In the US, the struggle around the control of the @occupywallstreetNYC account even escalated in a legal case, opposing a group of OWS activists to Detroit-based activist Justin Wedes accused of “hijacking” the Twitter account<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://globalrevolution.tv/vida/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Service-Dummy.pdf>

Second, these struggles contributed in delegitimising the most important public voices of these movements, thus nullifying the intense political labour expended by many activists. Thus, for example in Spain, the confrontation within DRY ended up delegitimising in the eyes of the movement, the group and its assets, resulting in the practical loss of the highly visible communication channels connected with the groups, which could have been very useful in the years after the first appearance of the indignados. Similarly in the US, the hi-jacking of Twitter accounts deeply demoralising, with the Justine Tunney's episode being described as a "debacle" for the movement even by her own friends<sup>13</sup>.

The responsibility for these disputes should not be retrieved simply in the unethical behaviour of opportunistic individuals. It should instead be seen as the reflection of a more systemic problem: the inability of high-minded libertarian values to balance the desire from groups and individuals to assert control over accounts, which possess an evident value (one also quantifiable in economic terms) due to their reach of a user base of hundreds of thousands of followers and fans, and the possibility of influencing political debates. Tim Fitzgerald, an Occupy activist who became well-known within the movement because of his "live minuting" of general assemblies, argues that these struggles reflect the "capitalist property mentality" intrinsic in social media and its "politics of name and password" which he sees as reflecting "the same mechanism of lock and key" of physical property. According to him it is necessary for activist to move towards a "collective credentials system" in which collectives rather than individuals would be assigned ownership of accounts, thus making the hi-jacking of social media assets more difficult and forcing team members to find a consensus on all important decisions. Proposals as the one by Fitzgerald are testament to the increasing awareness about the continuing existence of power and leadership dynamics within digital movements and the need to establish new forms of democratic control over them to avoid the highly divisive struggles that have resulted from the lack of clear management rules.

## **Scrutinising the power of digital vanguards**

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<sup>13</sup> <http://occupywallstreet.net/story/justine-tunney-debacle-occupywallstorg>

Exploring the internal functioning of social media teams responsible for the management of power accounts of recent protest movements this article has interpreted them as digital vanguards, collective leadership structures whose very existence runs in contradiction with the libertarian values of openness, horizontality and leaderlessness that permeate activist discourse.

The theorising of social media teams as vanguards has mainly served to emphasise the collective rather than individual character of emerging leadership structures. This is an aspect that is at loggerheads with prevalent understandings of leadership that tend to identify leadership with its most personalistic manifestations (Barker, Johnson, Lavalette, 2001), overlooking the importance played by collective forms of leadership. Within the 2011 wave of protest there have in fact also been manifestations of individual forms of leadership, as exemplified in the role played by “micro-celebrity activists” (Tufekci, 2013), individuals with large followings on Twitter and Facebook, sometimes acquiring a central position in political conversations. Yet, it can be argued that digital vanguards had a more important role than micro-celebrities, due to their responsibility for managing the most important voices of social movements. The importance gained by digital vanguards is thus a reminder of the fact that beside their individualising tendency described by new media psychologist as Sherry Turkle (2012), social media have also afforded new possibilities for cooperation (Weiss, 2005, Bonabeau, 2009).

Talking of social media teams as digital vanguards however requires some important *caveats* due to the negative connotations of authoritarian and paternalism connected with this term and the historical specificity of social media teams and the reflection of the values of a post-industrial and digital age. Compared with historical vanguards, social media teams have been characterised by a far more libertarian attitude, attempting to integrate values of openness, horizontality and leaderlessness and the participatory culture of the Internet (Jenkins, 2006) in their operations, with varying degrees of success. This has been seen in the way in which they have tried to be inclusive towards outsiders and have adopted informal modalities of coordination rejecting fixed roles and responsibilities. While there are no doubt some positive elements in this attempt to “open up” vanguards, the frequently uncritical adherence to libertarian values drawn from the hacker culture and post-1968 protest movements has generated some major frictions with the strategic requirements of leadership, and connected concerns about security, reliability and control of protest communications.

Social media teams have proven very competent at the phase of inception of their parent

movements, demonstrating the power of flexible and informal organising supported by digital communication technologies. This has been testified in the last instance by the fact that they have rapidly attained a vast user base, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, thus locating these accounts among the most popular social media channels for political discussion in their respective countries and by the important role these channels have played in mobilising people for offline actions, an aspect I have discussed in my previous work (Gerbaudo, 2012). These outcomes are particularly impressive when taking into account the volunteer character of political labour involved, and the informal character of their internal coordination.

Despite these strengths, in the long term social media teams have experienced serious issues, resulting from a mismatch between high-minded libertarian principles - absolute openness, leaderlessness and horizontality - and a reality marked by the persistence of power dynamics, and of typical scourges of movement politics such as factionalism and opportunism. Claims to radical openness have often been contradicted by a tendency towards secretiveness and exclusion of newcomers. Assertions of leaderlessness have butted heads with the very presence of social media activist teams and their *de facto* role as organising hubs. Adherence to principles of horizontality has been contradicted by forms of internal power stratification reflected in the hierarchy of user rights and permissions of content management platforms. These problems can be understood as a consequence of the difficulty in maintaining consensual decision-making procedures when groups grow beyond a certain size (Gastil, 1993). At their inception the relatively small group size allowed activists to organise quite effectively in an informal manner. Yet, with the passing of time, the growth in workload, group size and internal diversity in terms of backgrounds and political positions posed serious challenges to the maintenance of cohesion and coordination, leading different factions and individuals to compete for control.

The issues experienced by social media teams beg the question of possible solutions. For some scholars as David Kreiss and Zeynep Tufekci, the problem lies in the very informal character of these movements, and their advice is thus that these movements should adopt formalised organisational structures (2013), as those of parties and NGOs. This line of criticism seems however to ignore the long history of social movements as informal organisations (Diani, 2000), precisely because of their criticism of formalised organisations and their bureaucratic tendencies, and to overlook the problems inherent in processes of formalisation and professionalisation. I contend that what is required instead is the establishment of informal rules

of behaviour that could make the operations of social media teams more transparent and accountable to the movements they serve, as in the proposal of a collective credentials system advanced by Tim Fitzgerald.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of social media teams proposed in the article demonstrates that leadership – a process seen in different shapes in virtually all social movements (Barker, Johnson and Lavalette, 2001) - has not miraculously disappeared in a digital era, as often claimed by scholars. Rather - as demonstrated by the doings of social media teams, and their role as digital vanguards within many contemporary movements - leadership is being recast in new forms that make use of the affordances of social media. This trend leads to a contradiction between the libertarian principles of openness, horizontality, and leaderlessness, adhered to by digital activists and the strategic needs of giving a coherent direction of collective action and maintaining forms of control over the content that is produced on social media accounts. While social media teams have managed to navigate this contradiction reasonably well at their inception, in the long term it has produced serious frictions.

The findings and theorising of this article have important implications for scholars and activists. Scholars are urged to scrutinise the ideological subtext of terms as horizontality and leaderlessness, that have become sort of unquestioned dogmas in the analysis of contemporary digital activism, and to reopen the debate on leadership and its meaning in a digital society. Future research will need to further excavate the novelty of the interactive and participatory kinds of leadership seen in contemporary digital activism and flesh out in more detail the nature of the interaction between digital leaders and the crowd of ordinary Internet users. Activists instead are advised to establish new mechanisms of democratic control over digital vanguards and their social media assets, to make the forms of power associated with them more accountable. Since the libertarian hope that leadership would evaporate as a consequence of the diffusion of network technologies has proven ill-founded, the challenge we face is to develop a conceptual framework to understand the manifestations of leadership in a digital era and to devise concrete political practices to restrain and regulate them.

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## Appendix

This article is based on 12 in-depth interviews with activists who participated in Occupy Wall Street in the US, Democracia Real Ya in Spain, and UK Uncut in Great Britain. Interviewees were selected among the most prominent digital activists in each of the movements considered in this investigation. Interviews lasted for around an hour, discussing the internal operations of digital activism and their problems.

	Name	Country	Group
1	Marta Franco	Acampada Sol	Spain
2	Klaudia Álvarez	Democracia Real Ya	Spain
3	Pablo Gallego	Democracia Real Ya	Spain
4	Fabio Gándara Pumar	Democracia Real Ya	Spain

5	Javier Toret	Democracia Real Ya	Spain
6	Shawn Carrié	Occupy Wall Street	US
7	Joan Donovan	Occupy Wall Street	US
8	Tim Fitzgerald	Occupy Wall Street	US
9	Isham Christie	Occupy Wall Street	US
10	Micah White	Occupy Wall Street	US
11	Steve Reid	UK Uncut	UK
12	Liam (anonymised)	Uk Uncut	UK